DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 404 862 FL 024 423

AUTHOR Bray, Eric
TITLE Using Limericks To Help Japanese Students Improve Their Pronunciation.
PUB DATE 4 Nov 95
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Association of Language Teachers (21st, Nagoya, Japan, November 1995).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Interference (Language); Japanese; *Language Rhythm; *Phonology; *Poetry; *Pronunciation Instruction; Second Language Instruction; *Stress (Phonology); Suprasegmentals
IDENTIFIERS Lear (Edward); *Limericks

ABSTRACT

The role of phonology in communication is explored, and it is argued that explicit instruction in English phonology for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) is a valuable aid in promoting communicative competence. Further, it is proposed that limericks can be used as a means for classroom instruction in English phonology. Focus is on ESL instruction for native speakers of Japanese, and the particular problems, often with suprasegmentals, encountered by those learners. An approach to teaching English phonology using the limericks written by Edward Lear in the nineteenth century is described. The technique addresses three important suprasegmental features: stress, unstress, and stress-timed rhythm. A limerick exercise is described. The poems are found particularly useful because they are short, rhyme well, are easy to memorize, and usually include a drawing that helps convey meaning. More conversationally-based, rhythmic language forms such as jazz chants are proposed as a next step in communication-based phonological instruction. Contains 28 references. Five additional Lear limericks are appended. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 404 862

Using Limericks to Help Japanese Students Improve their Pronunciation

by

Eric Bray

(A workshop based on this paper was presented at the Japanese Association of Language Teachers Annual Conference, November 4, 1995)

Introduction

Explicit instruction in English phonology (the English sound system) was for many years one of the main tasks of EFL/ESL teachers. As EFL/ESL teaching methodology gradually moved towards the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) paradigm, which in its strong version focuses on communication as both the goal and the means of instruction, explicit instruction in English phonology became less prevalent. Today, many language teachers involved in CLT either give English phonology minimal treatment feeling that it plays a small role in communication, or ignore it entirely seeing it to be in conflict with CLT methodology. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role that English phonology plays in communication, and look at how limericks can be used to help learners gain awareness in this area.

I will begin by surveying the changes that have taken place during the past 45 years leading to current thinking on the role of explicit instruction of phonology in EFL/ESL education. Then, I will look at some of the problems Japanese learners have acquiring English phonology particularily at the suprasegmental level, and at some of the possible causes of these problems. Finally, I will describe an approach I have developed using the limericks written by Edward Lear more than 150 years ago, to help students learn about English phonology, ultimately, with the goal of helping them improve their listening and speaking skills.

FL024423

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Eric Bray
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Survey of 45 years of Explicit Phonological Instruction

1950-1975

Interest in traditional approaches gradually decreases

During the 1950's and 1960's, proponents of both Audiolingualism developed in the United States and Situational Language Teaching developed in Britain viewed linguistic competence as the primary goal of language instruction. Phonological accuracy was seen as one component of linguistic competence, and was mainly viewed as the accurate production/reception of segmental features (individual sounds) and words. Brown (1992, 52) states that "we taught and tested the knowledge and forms of the target language...knowing language meant knowing the correct pronunciation, the right ways to make words, the correct ways to produce the correct forms of the words and how to associate them with the regular meanings." Students received instruction in articulatory phonetics and meaningful phonemic contrasts, e.g. ship/sheep, as well as some structurally based instruction in stress, rhythm and intonation. Much of the practice related to this instruction was via drills highlighting individual phonemes. This practice was primarily designed to help students overcome the influence of the first language.

Several major paradigm shifts occurred over the course of the 1950's, 60's and 70's in the conception of what language is and how it should best be taught. The major paradigm shifts were:

1) The Chomskyan revolution in linguistics led to a view of language learning as being more of a cognitive process than a process of conditioning.

2) Work by British theorists such as Halliday (1970) and Widdowson led to a change from a focus on language form to a focus on language as a functional system used for communication.

3) Canale and Swain's conception of communicative competence as a multidimensional skill encompassing not only linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic, discoursal and strategic competencies.

4) Work by Earl Stevick and H.D. Brown pointing to the influence of the affective state of learners on the second language learning process.

These paradigm shifts led teachers to question traditional approaches to teaching about English phonology. It seemed to many that the use of language drills (the old joke goes "a tool for boring") was in conflict with the conception of learners as cognitive creators of meaning. Also, in traditional approaches learning was to some extent viewed as proceeding automatically, regardless of student interest or attention. Many teachers began to wonder if the many hours spent helping students perceive and produce phonemic differences might be better spent doing communicative activities more interesting and perhaps more useful to students.

The result of these changes in perspective was that by the late 1970's many EFL/ESL teachers no longer spent much time explicitly teaching students about English phonology. The choice to many teachers seemed to be between teaching about articulatory phonetics, with pictures of the human mouth and tongue in various positions and no explicit instruction in English phonology at all. As we will see, the pendulum was soon to swing back "on paper" anyway, as many theorists began to make the case for suprasegmental features of phonology (stress, rhythm, prosody, intonation, etc.) playing an important role in communication. I say "on paper" because many teachers today continue with a limited conception of the role of explicit phonological instruction which is actually based on teaching practices prevalent more than 20 years ago. (see Adam Brown's "*Minimal Pairs: Minimal Importance?*" for a critical look at one of these practices)

In the next section we will look at how during the last 20 years, EFL/ESL theorists and teachers have come to look at the role phonology plays in communication, particularly phonology at the suprasegmental level. This is information that all language teachers should be aware of. Ultimately, however, in deciding what to teach and how to teach it, teachers will have to take into consideration the needs of their students, as well as other factors related to the specific context in which they are teaching. These issues will be explored later in the paper.

1976-1996

Interest in suprasegmental features increases

Beginning in the late 1970's, several teacher/theorists sensing that explicit phonological instruction was being largely ignored by teachers working within the budding CLT paradigm, began to write about the role phonology plays in both oral and aural aspects of communication, (Brown, 1977, Pennington and Richards, and Pica). They suggested that at a very basic level if

communicative competence was the goal of language learning, then it would have as one of its essential components intelligible pronunciation. Hence, intelligibility rather than the native-like competence valued in traditional approaches became the goal of phonological instruction, as well as the criteria for judging the usefulness of specific phonologically related activities.

In traditional teaching approaches, not only was a great deal of time spent working on pronunciation accuracy, but the focus was on the accurate production of segmental language features. Errors at the segmental level, however, are often times not a hindrance to intelligibility. For example, the following utterance, "yesterday I saw a sheep down at the harbor" would probably fail to cause communication difficulties inmosst parts of the world because the listener could use context to grasp the speaker's intended message even though one of the key words was mispronounced. Hence, it began to appear to many teachers that if intelligibility was the goal of instruction, work at the segmental level might not be as important as previously thought.

In contrast, the suprasegmental level of English phonology began to be seen as a more important area for students to work with. The suprasegmental level of phonology refers to "features that clearly extend over a series of segmental groups" (Crystal, 22), such as stress, rhythm, prosody, intonation, juncture and voice quality. Suprasegmental features are often used by the speaker to express interactional meaning, (Pennington and Richards), and to express how one feels about the topic or the person one is communicating with. Suprasegmental features are also used to help manage the conversation, e.g. turn taking, topic shifts etc. Dirven and Oakshott-Taylor (333) found that "to interfere with stress timing and fundamental frequency usually has more drastic consequences for comprehension than removing the cues of a particular segment". In the following sections a more in-depth look will be taken at these suprasegmental features of the English sound system and the role they play in communication.

Stress and Unstress

One of the most important suprasegmental features of English is stress. Stress is characterized by syllables that are more forcefully produced, and hence, are longer, louder and usually contain a pitch change. At the word level all words of two syllables or more contain a stress pattern that is evident when the word is spoken in isolation. Listeners rely on a word's stress pattern when decoding it, and hence, even if the segmental features (individual sounds) of a word are pronounced correctly, if it is spoken with the wrong stress pattern, it can be difficult

to understand.

When words are spoken in an utterance of any length, not all of the words will retain their characteristic stress pattern. Words in an utterance that retain their stress pattern are often words that are high in information content. These stressed words are usually lexical items important within the particular context, and when taken alone, comprise a telegraphic form of the message very useful to the listener. According to Brown (1977, 56) "From the point of view of the comprehension of spoken English, the ability to identify stressed syllables and make intelligent guesses about the content of the message from this information is absolutely essential".

Here the relationship between "bottom up" and "top down" processes can be clearly seen. "Bottom up" processing refers to the perception of sounds leading to the recognition of words and ultimately the understanding of the message the speaker is trying to convey. This was the traditional view of how listening comprehension takes place. "Top down" processing refers to the listener's use of inferential processes, e.g. background information , context and expectations, when decoding the message. Currently, many view these two processes as being interdependent as clearly, some "bottom up" processing has to take place to provide the basic material upon which "top down" processing can operate.

Brown stresses the importance of training learners to pay attention to the stressed words in the speech stream as these carry the most meaning. She emphasizes that those listeners that fail to distinguish these important words are "likely to flounder in the unstructured message". (151). Speakers unconsciously stress particular words in an utterance in order to signal to the listener what information is important. Hence, the message itself is structured by stress and its counterpart unstress.

Unstressed elements of an utterance are usually functional items, and are,of course, also important to the message, but as they are parts of patterns frequently heard, they are relatively easy to infer from context. These unstressed elements can be difficult for language learners to perceive as sounds tend to change when they are not stressed. Vowel sounds, for instance, can lose their color and move towards the mid-central schwa position (reduction), e.g. "go to the store" becomes "gotathastor" . Unstressed sounds often blend with neighboring sounds (assimilation), e.g. "What you" becomes "whacha" , or disappear entirely (elision), e.g. "tell him" becomes "telim" .

Unstress presents problems for all second language learners but especially for those who expect to hear carefully spoken "teacher talk" or for those who are accustomed to dealing with written text. As Rost (38) notes, " listeners who anticipate hearing ideal pronunciation of words will have considerable difficulty decoding connected speech since all phonemes change perceptual features in different phonetic environments". Learners need to become able to selectively listen for the important stressed words, and to not panic when some words in the utterance are difficult to understand.

Stress-timed Rhythm

Speech in all languages, if delivered fluently without interruption, is said to have rhythm. Rhythm is created when certain phonological events occur at roughly equal intervals in time. The phonological event with which English is timed is the stressed foot. A foot is comprised of a stressed syllable and the unstressed syllables in front of it up to the next stressed syllable. According to Hoelquist (20) "speakers alter production so as to move in the direction of equalized units" (isocrony), and this alteration results in the previously mentioned reduction, assimilation and elision of unstressed elements commonly found in naturally spoken English.

It should be clear that speakers give stress to certain words in an utterance in order to better get their message across, and that this necessitates unstressing other elements in order to maintain the stress-timed rhythm typical to English. Although this is done unconsciously by native speakers, we can see how from the point of view of speaking, communicative concerns from the "top down" influence English phonology at both the suprasegmental and segmental levels. Failing to approximate this stress-timed rhythm has consequences for communication. Adams, who studied the influence of rhythm on intelligibility found that many learners produce "an anomalous rhythm which seriously impairs the total intelligibility of the utterance" (122). Hence, it would seem that explicit instruction in how and why English stress-timed rhythm is created would be of benefit to students.

Intonation and Juncture

Another way that communicative intent is expressed through phonology is how intonation is used to express a speaker's attitudes about the topic or towards the listener.

Intonation refers to the variation in pitch in the voice of the speaker. By changing the intonation of a single utterance, a speaker can express very different attitudes, e.g.

"Eat this cake", she said
"Eat this cake", she said angrily
"Eat this cake", she said invitingly

It is also important to note that in all languages discourse is organized into stretches of speech with pauses in between (juncture). Pauses are used to separate stretches of speech at the phrasal, clausal and sentence level, and they help the listener mark off and process important syntactic structures which are closely related to thought groups at a semantic level. As speech becomes more rapid and fluent, pauses within the sentence tend to be replaced by falling intonation, which serves the same purpose as a pause. Pauses and falling intonation are also very important in terms of communicative interaction as these features are used by speakers to signal turn-taking and topic shifts.

As was noted earlier, stressed words contain high information content and are important for the listener to hear. There is usually a stressed word found towards the end of a stretch of speech. The intonation pattern together with the changing pitch and pauses can help cue the listener to the up-coming important stressed word. "Listening to phrasing... gives overt phonological marking to major constituents in sentence structure ...thus intonation can assist the development of receptive skills and help students to process "what goes with what" and how the information of a text develops"(Brazil, et al, 131).

Excluding instances where contrastive stress is used, a word carrying primary stress is normally found at the end of a sentence, and consequently, English is said to be an "end loaded" language. The beginning of an utterance, according to Halliday (1979, 68), is more likely to contain information that is already known or "given", and hence, it is said that spoken English discourse tends to be structured in a "given-new" format. Characteristically, speakers use stress, intonation, pauses and pitch to highlight this discourse structure, and consequently, listeners need to pay particular attention to the end of utterances as it is here that new and important information can usually be found. Of course, the beginning of utterances are also important for listeners to attend to as it is here that "framing" and the building of context occurs.

It is also interesting to note that some theorists consider intonation to be a paralinguistic feature of language as facial expressions and gestures are linked to the intonation structure and rhythm of spoken English. These kinesthetic features increase in frequency where stress and pitch change occurs, and like stress and intonation, provide cues for when to listen carefully.

To conclude, it should be clear that rather than being merely surface features of linguistic accuracy, suprasegmental features of English such as stress, intonation and juncture are deeply a part of the communicative process. By gaining greater understanding of how these features function in communication, learners' listening comprehension should improve, and with practice, learners' speaking should also become more intelligible.

As was mentioned earlier, knowledge about the relationship between suprasegmental features of English phonology and communication is knowledge that all teachers involved in CLT should have. The extent, however, to which it should be passed on to students and the methods which are used to do so, will depend on learners' needs as well as on the context in which the teaching is to take place. In the next section we will take closer look at the problem areas of Japanese language learners particularily at the university level.

Phonological Problem Areas for Japanese Learners

Problems with Suprasegmental Features

When considering what to teach and what approaches are best for Japanese learners, we can look at areas related to phonology which give our learners difficulties, and focus our efforts here. Particularly for Japanese university students, it appears that in general, their weak areas are spoken fluency and listening comprehension.

Spoken fluency has two dimensions: a meaningful dimension and a mechanical dimension. At the level of meaning, speakers are fluent when they are able to quickly move from their thoughts to the spoken language used to express them. To improve in this area students need plenty of opportunities to use English to talk about their daily lives, thoughts and feelings. Pair work and group work where students get personalized speaking practice is ideal for helping them improve with this meaningful dimension of spoken fluency.

The mechanical dimension of fluency, however, relates more to the fluency that comes when one uses stress and unstress to produce a natural speaking rhythm. There are two main reasons Japanese learners have difficulty approximating English rhythm: 1) from a cross-linguistic perspective, the mora-timed rhythm of Japanese is distinctly different from the stress-timed rhythm of English, and 2) due to cultural influences and previous training, Japanese learners tend to employ a strong "accuracy" strategy that works contrary to fluency (Pennington,1987,5).

Looking first from a cross-linguistic perspective we see that whereas English has a stress-timed rhythm, Japanese employs a mora-timed rhythm. A Japanese syllable can consist of one or two mora, and a mora can be either a consonant+vowel combination, a vowel alone or the consonant "n". The rhythm of Japanese is created by the mora in an utterance being produced at roughly equal intervals of time (Hoelquist, 28). Consequently, Japanese do not use stress nearly as much as English speakers do to emphasize important words. Instead, they use particles, pauses and topical fronting to achieve the same results. For example, if we look at the English sentence "What is her father like?, the word "father" would typically receive primary sentence stress (the word "like" could also receive primary stress if the father was already the topic of the conversation). In Japanese this same question would be expressed as "otoo-san wa donna hito?" Here we see that the important word "otoo-san" (=father) is moved to the front, and the particle "wa" is attached to indicate that it is the topic.

Another interesting point related to the difference in the timing and rhythm of Japanese and English is that in Japanese, as all syllables receive relatively equal stress, considerably less reduction of sounds takes place. Han (69) originally claimed that in Japanese the duration of a syllable or a utterance for that matter, was directly proportional to the number of mora in it, but in fact, Hoelquist (24) later determined that there was some compression and lengthening of sounds in Japanese too. This is of interest because regarding rhythm, it is often stated that English is a stress-timed language and Japanese is a mora-timed language. Actually, it is more precise to say that English is towards the stress-timed end of the continuum and Japanese is towards the mora-timed end.

The important thing to keep in mind is that far less stress and reduction occurs in Japanese than in English, and this causes the rhythm and feeling of the two languages to be distinctly different. The rhythm of a learner's first language is resistant to change, and tends to be imposed onto the second language one is trying to learn. As we saw earlier, this has a

negative effect on intelligibility. Japanese speakers of English, particularly at the lower levels, tend to speak in a staccato fashion. Some listeners who expect important information to be highlighted by stress and pitch change, speak of Japanese learners' speaking style as "dull and monotonous" or "choppy and monotonous" (Sharkey and Ushida, 3). In other words, not only does the rhythm many Japanese speakers of English employ detract from intelligibility, but it also seems to provoke a negative affective response in some listeners. One might discount listeners' affective responses when making decisions about what to teach in class, but as listeners often attribute perceptions like these to the speaker's personality rather than to the influence of the speaker's first language, learners should at least be made aware of the possible consequences of not attempting to move towards the rhythm of the second language.

As discussed earlier, apart from cross-linguistic inffluences, there may be other reasons for Japanese learners' difficulties approximating English rhythm. In general, English rhythm may sound and feel strange to Japanese learners, and the Japanese tendency to not want to appear as different, or particularly, more skillful than others, may result in a fear or dislike of sounding "foreign". Affective factors such as these have been found to have a strong influence on pronunciation. In a well known study by Guiora it was found that if subjects imbibed a small amount of alcohol, their pronunciation became more native-like. Although it is not possible to ask students to drink alcohol in class, this study does indicate that efforts to create a comfortable atmosphere may help students move in the direction of native-like pronunciation.
Pennington (1987, 7) posits that Japanese learners' problems with English rhythm are due to their tendency to focus on the accuracy of individual phonemes and words, and consequently they take an overly "bottom up" approach to pronunciation making it very difficult to produce longer stretches of fluent speech. She suggests that one reason for this tendency to focus on segmental features of language could be the training learners receive in Japan's education system, intensively studying individual characters (kanji) in order to learn to read and write Japanese.

Related to this last point, another influence on Japanese students' learning style may the need to study for exams which serve as gateways to educational advancement. For instance, students of English must intensively study grammatical structures, individual vocabulary items, and the correct pronunciation of these items, in order to pass discrete-item university entrance exams. It is also the case that many high school English teachers use little English in classrooms, nor do they ask students to do much speaking practice in pairs or small groups where students

could focus on communicating their thoughts rather than on the accurate production of target language. It is no wonder that when reaching our classes, students' speaking seems particularly mechanical and halting.

To conclude, the influence of their first language rhythm, and an accuracy-based learning style as well as other cultural factors make it difficult for students to produce or understand naturally rhythmical spoken English. Stress, unstress and stress-timed rhythm are suprasegmental features that we can work on with students and hope to see valuable improvement in both their listening and speaking abilities. Clearly, it is also important to create a clasroom environment in which students feel comfortable and free to make mistakes in the course of learning.

Explicit instruction of intonation patterns may also be useful, but perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree. Certainly the way that pitch, intonation and pauses are used to express feelings, attitudes and to manage conversation, e.g. turn taking, is important for learners to understand. Also, as we saw earlier, intonation can be used to cue listeners to upcoming important stressed words, however, intonation in English and Japanese functions similarly in several areas. For example, the unmarked intonation pitch pattern of statements (rise-fall) is common to all languages, and hence, appears to be biologically based (Vaissiere, 125). This is also the case with juncture as speakers of all languages tend to use pauses or falling intonation to chunk the speech continuum into blocks of different sizes, e.g. tone, breath, and thought groups. Also, when looking at the intonation patterns of information questions and yes/no questions in both English and Japanese, we find that the patterns are the same for both languages.

It would seem unnecessary to teach students about either universal features of language, or areas where positive transfer from Japanese occurs. However, it does seem that students often forget that English is a real language rather than merely a subject to be studied, and hence, their expression in English lacks the emotion, intonation and gestures they naturally use with Japanese. Consequently, it is important to remind students when to rely on some of their first language instincts.

Problems with Segmental Features

As we saw earlier, compared to problems at the suprasegmental level, problems at the segmental level may be less likely to detract from intelligibility. However, I will briefly describe some basic segmental areas which are problematical for many students. For example, as

Japanese syllable structure dictates that all consonants excluding "n" are followed by a vowel, Japanese learners tend to insert vowels into consonant clusters and after final consonants. This tendency is reinforced by loan words from other languages written in katakana, e.g. Makudonarudo (McDonald's). Vowel epenthesis, as it is called, has a negative impact on speaking rhythm and hence, intelligibility.

Regarding vowels, as there are many more vowel sounds in English than there are in Japanese, Japanese have difficulty perceiving and producing the variety of vowel sounds used in English. The distinction between the vowel sounds "o", "a" and "ə" is particularly difficult, and can cause communication problems, especially when basic words such as "woke", "walk", and "work" are indistinguishable. Difficulties with schwa were mentioned previously in relation to unstress and reduction, but the combination of schwa and "r", "schwa colored r" is not only very difficult to pronounce, but also found spelled in many different ways, e.g. (curd, word, heard, bird, herd). The situation with consonants is similar in that there are several distinctions such as l/r and b/v which are difficult for learners, but one has to wonder if errors here affect intelligibility enough to warrant spending much class time on these features. Finally, regarding vowel sounds, it's also important to point out to students that the vowel sounds of American, British, Australian English, etc. vary in certain instances.

To conclude, when looking at the phonological problem areas of Japanese learners, it seems students could particularly benefit from instruction related to suprasegmental features as these are so much a part of the communicative process. Secondarily, there are also some segmental features that create difficulties for learners. In the following section, an approach using limericks to help students improve in these areas will be explored.

Using Limericks to Help Students with Stress, Unstress and Rhythm

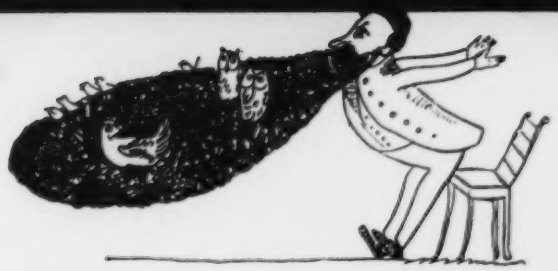
In the beginning of the year I use limericks to give students explicit instruction and practice with the most important elements of English phonology, i.e. stress, unstress and stress-timed rhythm. I do not use the ribald limericks most people think of when limericks are mentioned, but rather, use the limericks written by Edward Lear and first published in 1846. The explanations and controlled practice work on both the cognitive level and the level of automaticity, ultimately, with the aim of helping students improve both speaking and listening

skills.

Regarding sentence stress, Pennington (1987, 10) found that lower level speakers' utterances contain mainly stressed or strong syllables, and intermediate speakers produce both stressed and unstressed syllables, but only with more advanced learners does the use of stress relate to the information structure of the utterance. Hence, if we view this progression as a developmental sequence, it would seem that the first step would be to train students to be able to perceive and produce both stress and unstress. While doing so, the teacher should also show how important the stressed words are to the meaning of the limerick as a way of helping students move towards an understanding of how stress functions in communication. The teacher should also warn students not to give excessive stress to functional items such as pronouns and auxiliary verbs, as these types of errors are common when Japanese learners are first learning about stress, e.g. ''*What's he like*?" (non-contrastive) in which learners frequently stress "*he*". (Please note that the first line of many limericks begins with "*There was a....*", and that typically when limericks are recited this "*was*" is stressed. As this would be unnatural in conversation I do not stress "*was*", but instead give stress to the adjective that follows it. This does not seem to detract from the overall rhythym of the limerick.)

The unstress and reduction, assimilation and elision of sounds that occur between the stressed syllables is also important to teach students about as these characteristics of natural speech create many problems for listeners. Some teachers prefer not to teach about unstress for productive purposes due to the fact that reduction is so difficult for students to accomplish (Ur). Students' attempts to approximate reduced speech can sound very unnatural and overly informal. The mechanics of reduction are far more complicated than the mechanics of stress in which one only needs to make sounds longer and louder. There is also a certain paradox in having students carefully reduce unstressed sections of an utterance, as the attention here often results in added stress and explicitness which is contrary to the goal a speaker should have. I do, however, explicitly teach students about how and why reduction occurs while trying to emphasize that they should move quickly through the unstressed areas with soft and light pronunciation as suggested by Joseph Cronin (personal communication).

Figure 1



/ = stress
— = unstress
⌒ = intonation contour

There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!—
Two Owls and a Hen,
Four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

There was an old man with a beard
Who said "It is just as I feared
Two owls and a hen
Four larks and a wren
Have all built their nests in my beard"

For example, in the limerick above (Figure 1) the two long stretches of unstressed speech, " *It's just as I...*" and "*Have all made their...*" need to be pronounced lightly and quickly to maintain the rythym of the limerick. It is also important to explain the mechanics of reduction, for example, in both instances of "*as*" and "*and*" in the limerick above the vowel sound reduces to " ə ". It is also the case that the "*d*" sound in "*and*" is deleted. I feel that students' attempts to actively produce these sounds will sensitize their minds to these features, and ultimately, help them improve not only their sense of speaking rhythm, but also their listening abilities. Fortunately, the need to reduce unstressed areas is prominent in metrical verse such as limericks.

I usually begin my lesson by reciting the limerick, and having students listen for the stressed syllables and mark them on a handout containing limericks. The students take notes on their paper while I graphically show them on the board how the stressed and unstressed syllables alternate and work together to create the rhythm of the limerick (see Figure 1). I use different color chalk to indicate stress, unstress and intonation and show how intonation contours complement the alternation of stress and unstress. Next, I point out how high information words tend to receive stress and how the function words don't. Finally, students listen to me recite the limerick while looking at the notes on the board, and try to approximate my pronunciation.

Besides these suprasegmental features, I usually find a few instances of problematic segmentals, such as the vowels or "schwa-colored r" mentioned earlier, and have students work

to improve these features in the context of the rhythmic practice with the limerick. For example, in the limerick above there are 5 words that contain "r", and additionally the word "owls" is very difficult for students to pronounce as it contains a dipthong followed by the consonant "l".
I then ask students to practice the limerick at home during the next week, so as to reinforce the lesson and to encourage self-monitoring. At the beginning of the next class I have a few students individually stand and recite the limerick. I ask them to primarily focus on achieving a natural rhythm, and find it fairly easy to tell who has done the practice at home. An added benefit of using limericks is that "katakana pronunciation" (vowel epenthesis) is very difficult to maintain when reciting metrical verse, so practice with limericks helps students who have this tendency to make the transition to more native-like pronunciation.

I have found this approach with limericks to be an effective way to teach the basic phonological concepts of stress, unstress and rhythm, which can later be expanded upon while doing communicative activities. As limericks are short (5 lines) and contain elements that rhyme, they are easy for students to memorize. A major advantage of using these limericks is that Edward Lear also drew a picture to accompany each limerick that helps students understand its meaning.

Limericks for use in class need to be carefully selected so that they are sure to contain the phonological features that you want to focus on. As limericks are authentic pieces of poetry written more than 150 years ago, and were not created for second language teaching, they sometimes contain vocabulary or expressions that are out-dated. These limericks can either be omitted, or you can choose to replace the inappropriate words or expressions with ones more appropriate or useful to learners. Of course, some explanation of the vocabulary and meaning of the limerick is often necessary. (See Appendix A for more limericks)

It is important when you begin to use limericks that you give students some background information on their history and a brief rationale for why you are using them. I find it useful to compare limericks to haiku. As haiku are syllable-based (remember that within a syllable mora are relatively isocronic), the number of syllables in a haiku is constant. Limericks, however, being a type of poetry that has developed from a stress-timed language, are based on stress-timed rhythm, so the number of stressed beats is constant, though the number of syllables per line can vary between 5 and 13. The fact that a limerick contains a constant number of beats per line but a variable number of syllables, can be used to explain why speakers must reduce some sounds to maintain the proper rhythm when reciting limericks. I usually ask a student to recite a haiku after

which I recite a limerick so that students can get a sense for the difference between the rhythmical "feel" of the two types of prose. By nature, poetry is more rhythmical than conversational speech, but to some extent the rhythm of the poetry of a language relates to the rhythm of conversational speech.

Initially, I became interested in using limericks to teach students about phonology while reading a paper written by Douglas Jull, "*Teaching Pronunciation: An Inventory of Techniques*", which can be referred to for another approach to using limericks in the classroom (213). In my case, I have found that using limericks with students is a good way to give them a basic understanding of important phonological concepts. In the next section I'll briefly discuss options for helping students further develop this understanding.

Conclusion - Beyond Limericks

As was discussed earlier, the use of stress by Japanese learners seems to follow a developmental sequence. Learners begin by giving stress to most words, and slowly develop the ability to use stress and intonation as an integral part of the communicative process. In this paper I have explained how by working with limericks, students can gain a basic understanding of how key features of English phonology function, ultimately, with the goal of helping them improve their listening and speaking skills.

These key phonological features include stress, reduction and rhythm at the suprasegmental level and secondarily, some problematical segmental features. This approach with limericks focuses on both the cognitive level via explanations to students and also the level of automaticity via practice. I am not suggesting that teachers use limericks alone to teach students about English phonology, but by using limericks, it is possible to lay a solid foundation in basic phonological concepts within a relatively short time (4-8 class periods and 20 minutes per class). This is important considering the time constraints within the Japanese university system (25 classes per year / 90 minutes per class).

Once this basic foundation has been laid, the teacher has several options for helping students develop further. The teacher can transition to integrating phonological instruction with normal course materials, being sure to exploit the materials to build on the understanding students have so far developed, so that they can gain a more complete understanding of how

phonological features function in communication.

Another option would be to continue to use the warm-up period and the practice/homework routines already established, but transition to using a different medium, perhaps, one that is more conversationally based. "*Jazz Chants*" and "*Small Talk*" (Graham) contain conversational language patterns while utilizing a strong rhythm. Many of these are quite long, but they could be shortened or otherwise adapted to be more suitable for practice.

An approach that I have only experimented with, but which seems promising is one suggested by Goh (1994), based on Brazil's ideas about intonation. She suggests that students practice with "short dialogic exchanges" that illustrate how decisions about where and when to use stress and intonation are based on "the speaker's perception of their relationship (between speaker and hearer) in the unfolding context of interaction."(78). These types of exchanges often contain contrastive stress and would be good for helping students to further develop the ability to use phonological features to achieve communicative goals (see Appendix B).

The choice of which approach or materials to use to teach students about phonology will to some extent depend on individual teachers' interests and teaching style. The important thing seems to be for teachers to first become aware of the role that phonology plays in communication, and then look for ways to help students improve with this important aspect of communication in English.

The author would like to thank Joseph Cronin, Kenton Harsch, Robin Russ and Sophia Wisener who read and made valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Works Cited

Adams, Corrine. English Speech Rhythm and the Foreign Learner. The Hague: Moulton, 1979.

Brown, Adam. "Minimal pairs: Minimal Importance?" ELT Journal 49.2, (1995): 169-175

Brown, Gillian. Listening to Spoken English. 1977. New York: Longman, 1990.

---------- "The State of the Art in Applied Linguistics". Review of English Language Teaching: Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching. 2.1 (1992): 45-62

Brazil, David et al. Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching. London: Longman, 1980.

Brown, H. "Affective Variables in Second Language Acquisition". Language Learning. 23 (1973): 234-44

Canale, M. and Swain, M." Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing". Applied Linguistics. 1 (1980): 1-47

Crystal, David. Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English. 1969. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Dirven, Rene and Oakshott-Taylor, John. "Listening Comprehension (Part 1). State of the Art Article". Language Teaching. 17, (1984): 326-343

Goh, Christine. "Exploring the Teaching of Discourse Intonation." RELC Journal. 25.1 (1994): 77-98

Graham, Carolyn. Jazz Chants. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

----------. Small Talk. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Guiora, Alexander, et al. "The Effects of Experimentally Induced Changes in Ego States on Pronuunciation Ability in a Second Language: An Exploratory Study". Comprehensive Psychiatry. 13, (1972): 421-428

Han, M. Japanese Phonology. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1962.

Halliday, Michael. "Language Structure and Language Function". In Lyons (Ed.) New Horizons in Linguistics. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (1970): 140-165

----------. "Modes of Meaning and Modes of Expression: Types of Grammatical Structures and their Determination of Different Semantic Functions". In Allerton, D., et al (eds.) Function and Context in Linguistic Analysis: Essays Offered to William Haas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1979): 57-79

Hoelquist, Charles. "Durational Correlates of Linguistic Rhythm Categories". Phonetica 40, (1983): 19-31

Jull, Douglas. "Teaching Pronunciation: An Inventory of Techniques"In Avery, Peter and Erlich, Susan (Eds.).Teaching American English Pronunciation. Oxford, Oxford University Press, (1992): 207-214

Lear, Edward. A Book of Nonsense. 1927. New York: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1961.

Pennington, Martha and Richards, Jack. "Pronunciation Revisited". TESOL Quarterly. 20.2, (1986): 207-226

Pennington, Martha. "Acquiring Proficiency in English Phonology: Problems and Solutions For the Japanese Learner". Nagoya Gakuin Daiguaku Gaikokugo Kyoiku Kiyo. 16, (1987): 1-19

Pica, Teresa."Pronunciation Activities With an Accent on Communication". English Teaching Forum. 22.3, (1984): 2-6

Rost, Michael. Listening in Language Learning. New York: Longman, 1990.

Sharkey, Margaret and Ushida, Eiko. Metric Conversion: Acquiring English Rhythm. JALT 1995 presentation handout. 1995.

Stevick, Earl. "Toward a Practical Philosophy of Pronunciation: Another View". TESOL Quarterly. 9.1, (1975): 145-150

Vaissiere, Jacqueline. "Phonetic Explanations for Cross-Linguistic Prosodic Similarities". Phonetica. 52. (1995): 123-130

Widdowson, Henry. Teaching English as Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Wong, Rita. Teaching Pronunciation: Focus on English Rhythm and Intonation. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents, 1987.

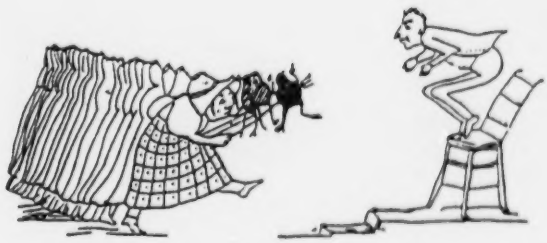
Eric Bray can be reached at:

46-2 Teramachi Ebisugawa Agaru
Nakagyo-ku, Kyoto, Japan, 604
e-mail - ebray@mbox.kyoto-inet.or.jp

Appendix A

(limericks)

There was a Young Lady of Ryde,
Whose shoe-strings were seldom untied
  She purchased some clogs,
  And some small spotty dogs,
And frequently walked about Ryde.



There was an Old Person of Rhodes,
Who strongly objected to toads;
  He paid several cousins
  To catch them by dozens,
That futile Old Person of Rhodes.

There was a Young Lady whose eyes
Were unique as to colour and size;
  When she opened them wide,
  People all turned aside,
And started away in surprise.

There was an Old Man of Melrose,
Who walked on the tips of his toes;
  But they said, "It ain't pleasant
  To see you at present,
You stupid Old Man of Melrose."

There was a young bard of Japan
Who wrote verses that no one could scan;
  When they told him 'twas so,
  He replied, 'Yes, I know,
But I always try to get as many words into the last line as I
  possibly can.'

UNKNOWN

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Appendix B

(short dialogic exchanges)

A) I bought some boots yesterday.

B) Really, what kind of boots?

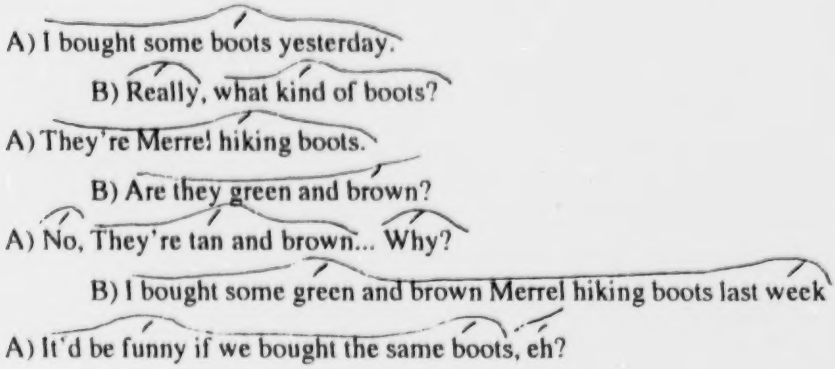
A) They're Merrel hiking boots.

B) Are they green and brown?

A) No, They're tan and brown... Why?

B) I bought some green and brown Merrel hiking boots last week.

A) It'd be funny if we bought the same boots, eh?


A) I bought some boots yesterday.
B) Really, what kind of boots?
A) They're Merrel hiking boots.
B) Are they green and brown?
A) No, They're tan and brown... Why?
B) I bought some green and brown Merrel hiking boots last week
A) It'd be funny if we bought the same boots, eh?